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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000812

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: KING DISCUSSES SAUDI-GCC RELATIONS, DOMESTIC  
POLITICS WITH AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) King Hamad told the Ambassador June 6 that a key issue discussed at last month's GCC Summit in Riyadh was relations between Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners. Kuwait is taking the lead on developing a unified position to take to the Saudis. Bahrain recommends that Kuwait focus on three issues: the Qatar-Kuwait gas pipeline, the 50,000 b/d Saudi oil grant to Bahrain, and disputed UAE islands controlled by the Saudis. Regarding Bahrain-Saudi relations, the King said they are much improved officially now that the FTA dispute has been resolved, but unofficially they remain cool because Saudi Arabia is uncomfortable with Bahrain's steps towards democracy. The King expected more Shia to participate in Bahrain's parliamentary elections next year, even if opposition society Al-Wifaq does not alter its official position to boycott. He also discussed a demonstration led by activist Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja that was dispersed in front of the royal court that morning, as well as the visit of an Iranian judicial figure that apparently led to a positive change of view by a leading Bahrain Shia cleric on proposed legislation dealing with women's rights.

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KUWAIT TO TAKE LEAD ON ISSUE OF SAUDI-GCC RELATIONS  
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2. (C) King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, in a June 6 meeting with the Ambassador, discussed at length the May 25 GCC Summit meeting, which he chaired in Riyadh. He said that Crown Prince Abdullah was clearly delighted with his trip to the U.S., but less pleased when the discussion turned to relations between Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners. The issue was first broached in a general way by Kuwait's Shaykh Sabah. King Hamad, as Summit Chairman, told his counterparts that this was an issue that deserved further study, and it was decided that Kuwait would undertake consultations with other GCC countries and that Shaykh Sabah would present the findings to CP Abdullah in the coming weeks.

3. (C) King Hamad said that he had met the previous evening with Kuwait Foreign Minister Dr. Mohammed, who was in Bahrain as part of a "reconnaissance" mission on behalf of Shaykh Sabah on the issue of GCC-Saudi relations. The King said he told Dr. Mohammed that Shaykh Sabah should focus on three issues when he meets with CP Abdullah: the proposed Qatar-Kuwait gas pipeline, the 50,000 b/d Saudi oil grant for Bahrain that was withdrawn last year, and several disputed UAE islands controlled by Saudi Arabia.

4. (C) Noting that the five smaller GCC countries now all have good relations among themselves, the King stated that the problem invariably was with bilateral relations with the Saudis. Given these difficult times, with instability in Iraq and uncertainty in Iran, it was critically important that the six GCC countries work together to strengthen their unity. He welcomed U.S. support on this, particularly on the three issues he had mentioned.

5. (C) In a subsequent meeting with the Ambassador June 7, Foreign Minister Shaykh Mohammed bin Mubarak said that Kuwait's actions to address intra-GCC frictions was a good initiative. It is better to address these issues in an open, transparent manner so that they can be resolved, he said. He thought Saudi Arabia was receptive to the project, which should be viewed as a friendly gesture among GCC countries and a sign of the maturity of their relations with each other. After Bahrain, Kuwait's Dr. Mohammed visited Doha and the UAE, and would follow on with consultations with Sultan Qaboos.

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BAHRAIN-SAUDI RELATIONS: OFFICIALLY IMPROVED; UNOFFICIALLY COOL  
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6. (C) Amplifying on Bahrain's own relations with Saudi Arabia, King Hamad said that the situation had improved now that Saudi Arabia had dropped its objections to the free trade agreement with the U.S. "Officially," the only real issue is the withdrawn 50,000 b/d oil grant. "Unofficially,"

however, relations remain cool because the Saudis continue to be uncomfortable with Bahrain's steps towards democracy. This is a problem Bahrain has with all of its GCC partners, he stated. Bahrain will always try to stay one or two steps ahead of its partners, but not more (and not less). It cannot afford to get too far out in front of its neighbors.

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DEMOCRACY: GESTURES TOWARDS SHIA UNLIKELY BEFORE ELECTIONS  
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17. (C) On the question of democracy, the Ambassador reviewed for the King the priority placed by the Bush Administration on democracy throughout the region during the second term, and USG efforts to support democracy through various programs, such as the very successful NDI program in Bahrain.

The Ambassador noted that Bahrain had been frequently praised by the President and senior Administration officials for the steps it had taken, but that praise also put a spotlight on Bahrain as the democratization process continued. People noticed, for example, if a demonstration were not allowed to be held, wondering if this marked a step back in freedom of expression. Also, the USG hoped for greater participation in next year's parliamentary elections.

18. (C) Asked how he saw the political situation in Bahrain now, the King responded that he saw things moving in a positive direction. He expected more Shias to participate in next year's elections unofficially, even if the opposition society Al-Wifaq officially did not change its official position to boycott. Asked if he was considering any gestures towards the opposition to encourage participation, the King expressed skepticism that this would work. He said that he had met personally with opposition leaders before the 2002 elections, and thought he had secured their agreement to participate. However, when they left the meeting, they went out and announced a boycott. In subsequent negotiations, the opposition had said that the underpopulated Southern governorate (Sunni) had too many seats and should be reduced by at least two. The King said that he had responded positively by reducing the seats by two, but the opposition still boycotted. So this time, he suggested, his gestures will come after they participate, not before.

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DEMONSTRATION AT ROYAL COURT DISPERSED  
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19. (C) On the question of demonstrations, the King said that a group of Bahrainis (press reports put the number at 30), led by activist Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja, had demonstrated in front of the royal court office for three days (as part of a protest about unemployment). He said that they had invited the protesters in to the court to discuss their complaints, but they had refused, saying they wanted to keep demonstrating. Because the demonstrators were starting to disturb access to the royal court, they were dispersed on the third day (that morning). He said that, just as there were rules in place to keep demonstrators at a certain distance from sensitive buildings like the U.S. Embassy, they would probably do something similar for the royal court. (Note: The press reported the next day that the royal court had issued a statement saying that the immediate vicinity of the royal court had been classified a security area in which rallies would not be permitted. At the same time, the statement added, the royal court would keep its doors open for the people. Reportedly, the royal court subsequently offered to help find employment for the protesters if they suspended the protest in front of the royal court, and protesters rushed over to the Ministry of Interior's office of employment to apply for jobs. End note.)

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IRAN PLAYS HELPFUL ROLE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS LAW  
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110. (C) Finally, the King mentioned that Iranian judicial official Ayatollah Sayed Hashemi Shahroodi had visited Bahrain last week and met with senior officials and religious leaders. The Crown Prince asked Ayatollah Shahroodi why leading Shia clerics in Bahrain were opposed to the proposed personal status law, which aims at protecting rights for women in such areas as child custody and inheritance. Ayatollah Shahroodi, according to the King, said that the Shia should support the law and promised to talk to senior Shia clerics such as Isa Qassim. The King said he just had just learned that, following his discussion with Ayatollah Shahroodi, Isa Qassim now supports the law. (Note: The law had been a key initiative announced by the King in his opening address to parliament last fall. Shia clerical leaders opposed the law on the grounds that religious leaders, and not secular members of the national assembly, should deal with such issues.)

MONROE